

Preventative War Doctrine

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The world of today is far different from that of the Cold War era. Whereas before many nations worked together to provide both social and political security, now it seems that the United States exists as the sole hegemon, who can utilize its power whenever and wherever it chooses. The world has also changed, however, in terms of the emerging threats. The United States and its allies can no longer say that they are at war with a single, country, but rather they are fighting terrorists who are unknowable, invisible, and unpredictable. Although both realist and liberalist theories merged with great success to provide answers to questions of world security in the past, many now question their effectiveness in fighting the new issues of world politics. In order to face these new challenges, many, including President Bush, argue that the US should adopt a “neoimperialist” strategy in which it “arrogates to itself the global role of setting standards, determining threats, using force, and meting out justice.”¹ Despite the new risks that the US faces in this uncertain global environment, of each state works to constrain the actions of every other state. During the Cold War era, the US focused its efforts against the Soviet Union by “denying it the ability to expand its sphere of influence.”² Out of the tension between the US and the Soviet Union came a bipolar system that provided great world stability. This stability was enforced through nuclear deterrence. The assured destruction of both countries and the high costs of nuclear engagement increased the stakes of a conflict between the US and the Soviet Union to an unacceptable level. This nuclear deterrence created both valuable partnerships for the US such as NATO and the US-Japan alliances and a world structure that fostered stability “through commitment and reassurance.”³

by maintaining its “old” tactics of security partnerships, instead of adopting a new preventative war strategy.

The realist idea of balancing world power has served to create a global system in which the power

Liberal theory dominated the Cold War era. These liberal reforms focused on improving relations between democracies and on opening world economies in an effort to create and preserve order. Similar to interdependence theorists, who argue that states who are dependent upon one

operate, liberals believe that opening markets will decrease the propensity for conflict. During this time, organizations like the World Trade Organizations proved that stability could also be provided by secure economic ties. As a result of these policies,

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the United States was able to utilize its “political weight to derive congenial rules, most fully protect American interests, conserve its power, and to extend its influence,”⁴ ultimately creating a world system characterized by order and stability.

Although realist and liberalist theory are “rooted in divergent, even antagonistic, intellectual traditions,”⁵ they have complemented each other surprisingly well over the past fifty years. While realist theorists encourage world powers to form alliance and power ties, and liberalists argue for more open trading circles, the result has been an increase in the security of all states. Through the complementary utilization of the realist and liberal strategies, the world has achieved a “political order of unprecedented size and success: a global coalition of democratic states tied together through markets, institutions, and security partnerships.”⁶

Despite the success of the fusion of liberal and realist philosophies in determining the international structure over the past fifty years, many argue that these institutions are outdated and ineffective in the twenty-first century. These neoimperialists argue that the United States should distance itself from its allies to act in a more autonomous, independent fashion, and instead should subscribe to a preventative war doctrine. The first argument that proponents of this new “grand strategy” advocate is that the US should establish itself as an untouchable sole hegemon. They argue that

by increasing its military force to a level beyond every other country, the US would discourage arms competition and so would in effect lower the security dilemma. Grand strategy theorists believe that if the US stands as a unipolar power, it will prove able to successfully use a preventative war strategy, and that this strategy will increase global security. With the US able to stop the threats of opposing nations, they argue, every country will feel more secure that these matters can be handled immediately and in the most effective manner.

Despite grand strategy theorists’ claims that preventative war and an all-powerful US will allow for international order, sustained unipolar action by the United States instead leads to a problem of self-encirclement, backlash from other nations. If the US attempts to create a global order in which it acts unilaterally without restrictions from other nations, it will set itself apart from the rest of the world and heighten the suspicions of other nations. Although neoimperialists claim that no nation will be able to counter the US in terms of military power, these countries can still harm America with economic sanctions, and by failing to cooperate in diplomatic missions. Unless the United States is prepared to deal with the consequences of European alienation, it must be very careful to not overextend its power.

Another risk associated with an increase in US power is that it cannot sustain its position as

world hegemon over a long time period. If the US solely decides which states pose threats to international security, this will cause a “diminishment of multilateral mechanisms — most important of which is the nonproliferation regime.”⁷ When the United States encounters situations where war is not the best option, and instead needs to rely on international diplomacy, the lack of multilateral mechanisms will result in a breakdown of diplomatic relations. Although the US states that the nonproliferation regime is of primary importance, the inspections and punishments that it enforces would be severely hampered if multilateral action was no longer possible.

In addition, if the United States increases its military power to a higher level, other countries may feel that they are entitled to act similarly. Despite the US’s argument that it cannot afford the risks of waiting for the international approval of its actions, the argument that the actions of other states do require international approval is the “only basis that the United States can use if it needs to appeal for restraint in the actions of others.”⁸ In adopting this policy of neoimperialism, the US should be fully prepared for nations such as Pakistan and China to do the same. These states will feel further pressure to restrict the power of the United States, which could lead to an arms race and heighten the security dilemma.

Proponents of a neoimperialist grand theory also argue that the US needs preventative war

capabilities to respond to the changing threats of the twenty-first century. These theorists, including those working for the Bush administration, propound that we need preventative war to counter both terrorist threats and to punish countries that harbor terrorists. They argue that “small groups of terrorists — perhaps aided by outlaw states — may soon acquire highly destructive nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons that can inflict catastrophic destruction,”⁹ and that these terrorist organizations will prove unappeasable. In order to deal with these threats, the Bush administration argues, we must be able to eliminate the terrorists themselves and punish the nations that foster terrorism. In addition, many warn that terrorist organizations will soon have nuclear capabilities and will not hesitate to use them. In this “age of terror,” many argue that “there is less room for error,”¹⁰ and so the immediacy of preventative war is necessary to effectively counter these looming threats.

Proponents of this new grand strategy argue that the US needs to be able to “take on potential threats before they can present a major problem;”¹¹ however, by acting preventatively, without the support of other nations, the US risks engaging in war without a clear threat to its security. In effect, this doctrine would decrease the justification that nations need to engage in war, and would lead to an increase in international conflict. Whereas the United States previously joined other nations in

condemning the preventative tactics used in Israel's bombing of Osirak, its new doctrines advocate engaging in these actions itself and it should expect a similar international outcry.

In addition, neoimperialism would prevent the United States from solving many important problems which require international cooperation. To conquer the threat of terrorism the US "needs cooperation from European and Asian countries in intelligence, law enforcement, and logistics."¹² The US also needs the aid of other nations in combating problems such as environmental protection and possible threat of China. Should the United States decide to act as a unipolar hegemon, Europe and many other countries may punish the US by denying it help with these pressing issues.

The final justification that proponents of a neoimperialist grand theory assert is that the United States' preventative war would, in fact, be in accord with the just war tradition. Though President Bush's administration argues that preventative strikes against terrorist threats are "exercising our right of self-defense,"¹³ and are therefore considered just war tactics, Bush's team fails to account for many other aspects of the just war tradition. In order for a war to be just, it must be characterized by both just initiation and just means. Just initiation requires that a country has tried all other forms of resolution, is a legitimate party to initiate a war, has proper intentions, will most likely be successful, has a defensive purpose to the war,

and is in a situation where the benefits outweigh the costs. Although some or all of these may be true in a preventative war situation, not every preventative war is marked by these characteristics.

A war must also have just means according to the just war tradition. Just means includes not attacking civilians, using appropriate weapons, not pillaging, not authorizing assassinations, and not destroying cultural or religious structures. The US's preventative war theory goes against many of the components of the just war tradition, and so appears to encourage other states to do the same.

Although the Bush administration argues that it reserves the right to use preemptive warfare, it intends to go beyond merely attacking a country when it feels it is on the brink of attack, and instead will use preventative measures to stop a situation that could become a threat in the future. Bush fails to distinguish between preemptive and preventative warfare because although preemptive warfare is considered to be self-defense and thus fits within the just war tradition, preventative warfare is not in accord with the tradition.

The benefits that the US would achieve by adopting a preventative war doctrine are clear: capabilities to quickly combat terrorism, the power to act unilaterally, and the freedom to justify almost any engagement. However, the risks from these actions are far too great. Not only will the United States alienate its allies and incur punishment for its independent actions, it will also exacerbate the

security dilemma, risk self-encirclement, increase the propensity of other states to act unilaterally, and overall threaten global security. Although the rules of the game have changed since September 11th, the appropriate response is not for the US to subscribe to a preventative war strategy; rather, the US should look to maintaining its “ability and willingness to exercise power within alliance and multinational frameworks which made its power and agenda more acceptable to allies and other key states around the world.”¹⁴

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